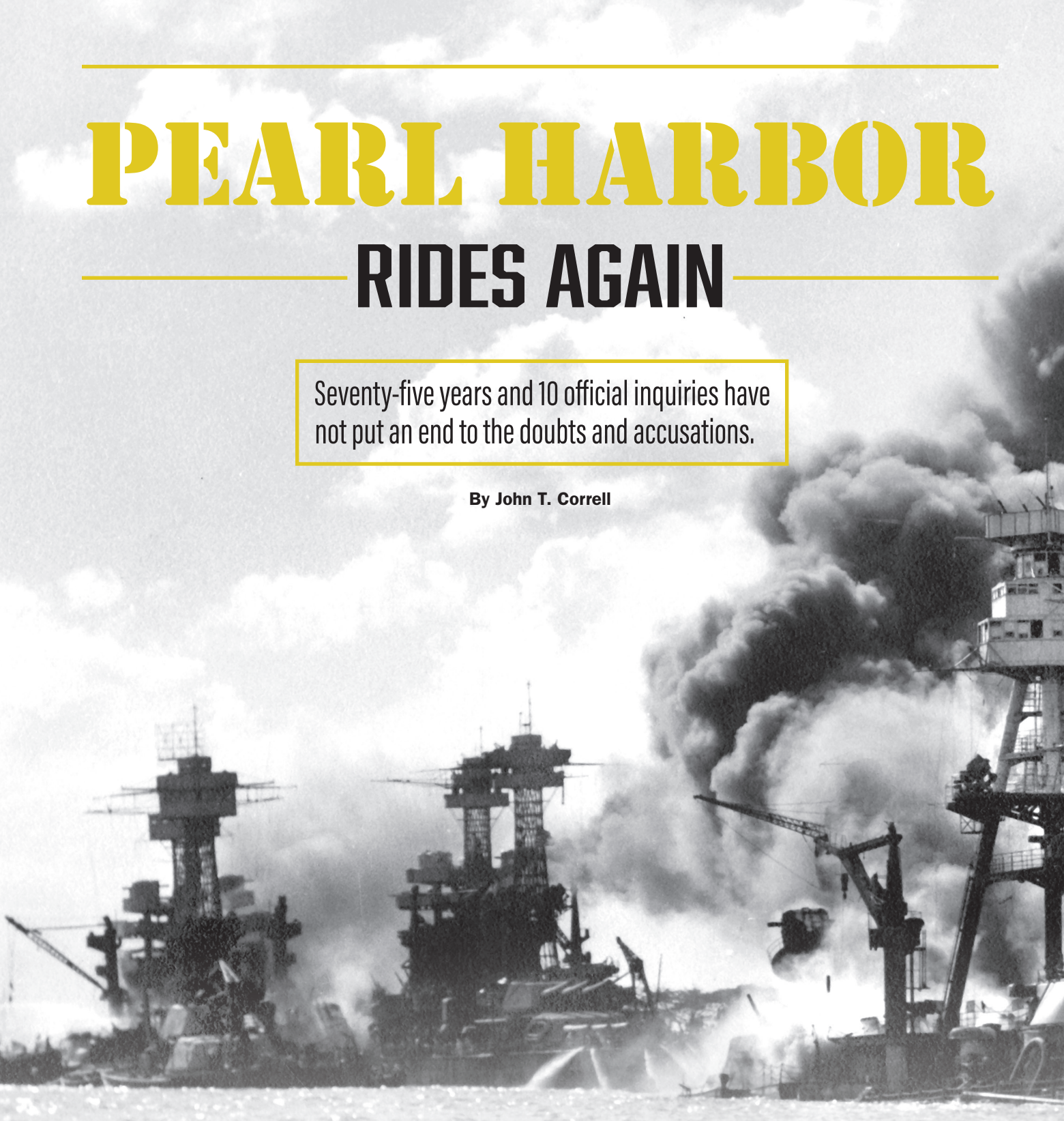
PEARL HARBOR RIDES AGAIN

Seventy-five years and 10 official inquiries have not put an end to the doubts and accusations.

By John T. Correll



THE smoke had barely cleared along Battleship Row following the attack on Pearl Harbor when the questions began. Why were the US Navy and Army caught by surprise and almost totally unprepared on Dec. 7, 1941? Who was to blame? The next day, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox flew in from Washington to find out what had gone wrong.

His report to President Franklin D. Roosevelt faulted Adm. Husband E. Kimmel, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, and Lt. Gen. Walter C. Short, commander of the Army's Hawaiian Department, for lack of readiness to meet the attack. Kimmel and Short were relieved from command Dec. 16 and reverted to their permanent two-star ranks.

A second investigation within the month, headed by Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts, accused Kimmel and Short of dereliction of duty. Both of them were shuffled off into retirement in their reduced grades—Short on Feb 28, 1942, and Kimmel on March 1.

"Remember Pearl Harbor!" became an instant rallying cry for the nation. It was the most enduring slogan of

Battleship Row on Dec. 7, 1941. USS *Arizona* is in the center, burning after an explosion that killed more than 1,100 seamen. To the left are USS *Tennessee* and USS *West Virginia. Tennessee* survived the attack. *West Virginia* was sunk but later salvaged and repaired.

US Naval History and Heritage Command photo

World War II and a fixture in the popular culture for many years. However, not everybody would remember Pearl Harbor the same way.

The basic facts are well known. A Japanese task force with six aircraft carriers arrived undetected 220 miles north of Oahu. When the attack began at 7:55 a.m. on Sunday morning Dec. 7, the US Navy and Army in the Hawaiian islands were on a relaxed weekend schedule.

The Japanese aircraft struck Pearl Harbor and Hickam and Wheeler Fields in two waves. Eight battleships and 10 other ships were sunk, capsized, or severely damaged. Seventy-six US aircraft were destroyed. The casualty total was 2,403 killed, missing, or died of wounds and 1,178 wounded.

Fourteen US pilots, acting on their own, got their P-40 and P-36 fighters into the air and shot down 10 of the Japanese attackers.

Losses would have been worse except that the US carriers were at sea. Nine hours later, US forces were surprised again in the Philippines, where the Air Force was caught on the ground and flat-footed. About 100 aircraft

US Naval History and Heritage Command photo

US Army photo

Above: Adm. Husband Kimmel (l) commanded the US Fleet and Pacific Fleet during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Lt. Gen. Walter Short (r) commanded the US Army Hawaiian Department. Both were roundly blamed for lack of preparation and were forced to retire. Below: A B-17 at Hickam Airfield that arrived during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, seen smoking in the background. This aircraft was probably piloted by 1st Lt. Karl Barthelmess, who would later receive a Silver Star for gallantry during his service in the Mediterranean Theater.

were destroyed or damaged, with 225 casualties sustained. (No action was ever taken to hold commanders in the Philippines accountable.)

Roosevelt released the report of the Roberts inquiry to the newspapers in January 1942 and many of them printed it in full. Later on, it would be generally agreed that the finding of "dereliction of duty" was too harsh, but because of wartime secrecy, Kimmel and Short had no opportunity for rebuttal until 1945.

In the interim, the Navy and the Army conducted six more investigations and inquiries, citing mistakes and failures on a broad front but with each service placing the larger share of the blame on the other.

Accusations first arose during the 1944 election campaign that secret information, withheld for political purposes, would prove that responsibility for Pearl Harbor "extended into high places in Washington." This was mostly the doing of minor partisan players and Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican presidential candidate, would have nothing to do with it.

Nevertheless, the clamor for further explanation led to a massive investigation by a joint congressional committee with hearings that lasted from November 1945 to May 1946. The mountain of data and testimony accumulated by this committee still remains the fundamental source for most of what is known and said about the Pearl Harbor attack.

The joint committee said that "the errors made by the Hawaiian commands were errors of judgment and not dereliction of duty." It also acknowledged that the Army and Navy in Washington

Army Signal Corps photo via National Archives

could have and should have provided more information.

That did not let Kimmel and Short off the hook. The inquiry found that they had failed "to discharge their responsibilities in light of the warnings received from Washington, other information possessed by them, and the principle of command by mutual cooperation."

The committee report faulted the Hawaiian commands for failure to integrate their efforts and work together, conduct effective reconnaissance "within the limits of their equipment," maintain a "state of readiness," and use their resources to repel the Japanese raiders or reduce the effects of the successful attack.

Kimmel and Short continued their efforts to salvage their reputations. Short died in 1949, Kimmel in 1968, but their families—especially the Kimmel family—have kept up the campaign. The government has periodically considered whether Kimmel and Short should be advanced on the retired list to their highest wartime ranks, but nine times between 1957 and 2015 decided against doing so.

In the postwar period, a "revisionist" movement emerged, contending that Roosevelt knew in advance about the attack but let it happen to serve his objective of carrying the United States into the war. At the extreme were the conspiracy theorists who accused Roosevelt of deliberately provoking the attack.

Historian Gordon W. Prange studied the Pearl Harbor attack for almost 40 years. The gist of his work, published posthumously as *At Dawn We Slept* in 1982, is basically consistent with the findings of the joint congressional committee in 1946. Prange's research is widely regarded as definitive.

Arguments about Pearl Harbor mainly follow two broad tracks: what information officials in Washington and Hawaii had before the attack, and what actions they took as a result of that knowledge.

PORTENTS AND WARNINGS

In one sense the Japanese strike on Dec. 7 was a surprise. In another sense it was not. Air attack on Pearl Harbor had been a standard scenario in annual US fleet exercises since 1928, and Japan's aggression on the Pacific rim and its hostility toward the United States were widespread knowledge.

"General Short Sees Danger of Oahu Air Raid," said an Aug. 14, 1941 headline in the *Honolulu Advertiser*. Follow-up headlines took a more urgent tone: on Nov. 30, "Japanese May Strike Over Weekend," and on Dec. 5, "Pacific Zero Hour Near."

In 1940, the US had broken the Japanese diplomatic code, designated "Purple" by the Americans. The decoded Purple code intercepts were called "Magic."

The diplomatic messages revealed a great deal about Japan's strategic intentions but they did not contain much real military information. Still, the Army and Navy intelligence shops in Washington guarded their secrets jealously. Kimmel and Short were not on distribution for Magic intercepts.

All of the advance information was ambiguous. At no point did any US officials have definite knowledge of the coming attack. Kimmel and Short—especially Kimmel, as senior commander in the Pacific—had almost as much of the directly relevant information extracted from the intercepts as Washington did.

Both of them were aware that Japanese embassies and consulates had

National Park Service photo

Sailors at Ford Island Naval Air Station watch USS *Shaw* explode in the distance.


USN photo

been instructed to destroy most of their codes and ciphers and burn their secret papers. Both knew that the main Japanese carrier force had left home waters in November.

In addition, Kimmel was told that there had been no radio traffic from the carriers in several weeks and that Japanese navy forces afloat had changed their call signs twice within a month. He did not share that knowledge with Short.

On Nov. 27, Kimmel and Short got specific "war warning" messages. "Negotiations with Japan appear to be terminated," said the message from Gen. George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, to Short. "Hostile action possible at any moment,"

"This dispatch is to be considered a war warning," the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Harold R. Stark, advised Kimmel. "An aggressive move by Japan is expected within the next few days."

Kimmel said later that the term "war warning" had no standing in official Navy usage and that he did not know exactly what to make of it.

Neither Kimmel nor Short knew of the intercepted Purple code message from Tokyo to Washington, transmitted in 14 segments Dec. 6-7, with the final piece sent Sunday morning. The embassy was told to destroy its code machine and deliver the message to the Americans at 1 p.m. Eastern Time (7:30 a.m. in Hawaii, half an hour before the attack was supposed to begin).

The message did not disclose anything about the planned attack on Pearl Harbor, nor did it declare war or sever diplomatic relations. What it did was break off negotiations since "it is impossible to reach an agreement."

Despite that, it was alarming enough for Marshall to send another war warning to Army commands in the Pacific, including Hawaii. Short did not get his copy until after the attack, but it would have told him little more than he already knew about Japanese plans.

The most important information not given to Kimmel and Short was the so-called "bomb plot" message decoded in early October. The Japanese consulate in Honolulu was instructed to report the exact position of ships in specific locations in Pearl Harbor, essentially creating a grid of individual ships at their anchorages.

Kimmel had a point when he later complained that this message was a strong implication of a planned air attack. He had not been told because the chief of naval war plans in Washington stubbornly insisted on holding the intelligence report within his own domain.

MYSTERIOUS INTERCEPTS

The revisionists gained in credibility when John Toland joined their ranks with the publication in 1982 of *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath.* Toland, who had won a Pulitzer prize for previous work, signed up to the theory that Roosevelt knew several days ahead of time that a Japanese fleet was headed for Hawaii.

"Toland has responded to criticism by conceding that as much as 50 percent of the new information in his book, released last April, may be proven false," a UPI wire dispatch said in December 1982. "But the evidence that Washington knew of the approaching fleet is too overwhelming to ignore, he said."

He relied heavily on the word of a former seaman first class, identified only as "Z" in the book, who was persuaded to talk to Toland by Kimmel's son. In December 1941, Seaman Z was a 20-year-old electronics technician at the Twelfth Naval District in San Francisco. On Dec. 2, commercial cable companies reported detection of radio signals they could not identify. Seaman Z made cross bearings of these and calculated the likely point of origin.

USN photo via National Archives

USN photo via National Archives

National Park Service photo

Above l-r: USS *California* burns in the harbor. The Tennessee-class battleship was sunk, but salvaged and repaired. / An almost unrecognizable pile of aircraft wreckage at Wheeler Airfield. The wreckage includes at least one P-40 and a twin-engine amphibious aircraft. / A B-17 that arrived from California during the attack was destroyed by a blistering strafing attack after landing. Pictured below is a heavily damaged P-40 at Bellows Field. Fourteen pilots were able to get their P-40 and P-36 fighters into the air and shoot down 10 of the Japanese attackers.

According to Toland, Seaman Z speculated to his boss that the signals might be from the missing Japanese carrier force. It was "common knowledge," Toland said, that Z's boss was a "personal friend" of Roosevelt's and had direct access to the White House. The supposition was that Roosevelt had been "promptly informed" of the signals.

The *New York Times* and others soon located Seaman Z, whose name was Robert D. Ogg. He said that the tie to the Japanese carriers was pure guesswork. He had no idea of how such signals were tracked or identified.

For all that Ogg and his colleagues knew, "the signals could have emanated from a Liberian freighter, a commercial fishing fleet, or an off-course Lebanese taxi cab," an analysis by the National Security Agency said. Ogg's boss was dead by then, but no record could be found of any report from him to Roosevelt.

Seaman Z's story was one of several supposedly proving that the carrier strike force had been detected. In fact, the Japanese fleet had maintained absolute radio silence since its departure Nov. 26 from its assembly point in the Kuril Islands.

The ships communicated by signal flags during the day and by blinkers at night. Radio transmitters were disabled and no one was allowed near them. According to Minoru Genda, the officer who planned the attack, the pilots had agreed not to use their radios even if their lives depended on it.

WINDS EXECUTE

Toland also revived the "Winds Execute" issue, which had been debunked by the joint congressional committee in 1946.

In November 1941, US intelligence learned from intercepts that Japan had created a "Winds" notification system that would kick in should regular diplomatic communications be disrupted. Coded warnings and instructions would then be broadcast by regular short wave radio.

The words "East wind rain," for example, would mean impending trouble with the United States. "North wind cloudy" meant the Soviet Union. "West wind clear" would be Great Britain. To avoid mistakes, Winds messages would be distinctively formatted with prescribed forms and repetitions.

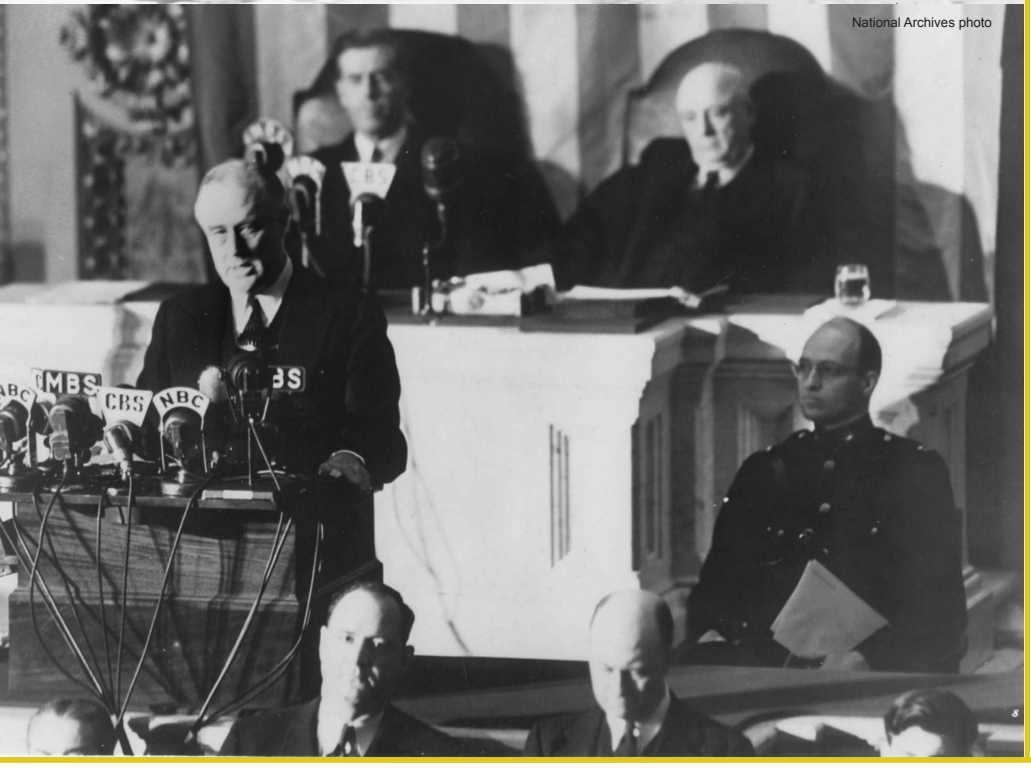
The ensuing furor was about a supposed "Winds Execute" message, which would have activated the procedure. In the 1940s, a naval intelligence officer, Capt. Laurance F. Safford, claimed that a Winds Execute message containing all three code phrases was decoded Dec. 4, 1941, a clue that the war was about to begin.

Questioned in the congressional hearings, he was unable to substantiate his claim. A National Security Agency recap noted that Safford "kept changing his story. His evidence was revealed as little more than a farrago of fabrication, speculation, poor memory, rumor gathering, and plain error-filled opinion."

The story returned in the 1970s, when Ralph Briggs, a former Navy Morse intercept operator, said that he had picked up an "East wind rain" message on Dec. 4, 1941. His account was weak in several places and he could not produce any evidence, but Toland cited him as a credible source anyway.

Below: USS *Arizona* sinks in the harbor. There is now a memorial placed over the hull of the sunken ship. Bottom: President Roosevelt delivers his "Day of Infamy" speech to a joint session of Congress on Dec. 8, 1941. Behind him are Vice President Henry Wallace and Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn. To Roosevelt's left is his eldest son, James, who would receive a Navy Cross for heroism as a marine during the war.

USN photo via National Archives



National Archives photo

There was in fact a Winds Execute message. It was broadcast Dec. 7 at 7:02 p.m. Washington time, more than six hours after the Pearl Harbor attack and the code phrase was "West wind clear," meaning Japanese relations with Great Britain were in danger. It was not about Pearl Harbor or the United States.

Nevertheless, the Winds Execute prediction of war—like the intercepted radio signals and Roosevelt's secret schemes—lived on in revisionist lore.

AT DAWN THEY SLEPT

Defense of the Hawaiian islands was primarily Short's job, and a corollary mission for Kimmel, as they shared responsibility for reconnaissance and patrol. Kimmel and Short said they would have taken stronger action if they had been better informed or if they had more resources.

On the other hand, they had plenty of general warning and commanders at their levels were expected to maintain a proper alert and defense without detailed instructions from Washington. Also, they did not make full use of the resources they had.

Kimmel and Short protested long and loud that they did not have enough aircraft for a 360-degree reconnaissance around Hawaii. Kimmel's PBY Catalina seaplanes could cover only about a third of that area. His main interest for reconnaissance was to the south, where his carriers were. The fleet was geared to meet and defeat an enemy at sea, not to defending Pearl Harbor.

Short pointed out that he had only a few long-range B-17s and said that the operating radius of his B-18s was 300 miles. In fact, without a bomb load, the B-18s had an operating radius of more than 500 miles.

Unable to mount a complete patrol, Kimmel and Short elected to do almost nothing, especially toward the northwest, the most likely direction for a hostile approach. Japanese intelligence reported Nov. 22 that, "United States air patrols are very good in the area south and southwest of Oahu, but generally inadequate to the north of the island."

Short had been told repeatedly that protection of the Pacific Fleet was his primary and overriding mission, but he resisted the idea. "In his heart, Short regarded the presence of the Pacific Fleet as protection for his Hawaiian Department rather than vice versa," Prange said.

Furthermore, Short saw the main danger as sabotage, not an enemy attack. He pulled enlisted technicians of the Hawaiian Air Force away from

their regular duties, cross-trained them as infantry, and put them on guard at airfields and at other locations.

He had airplanes removed from their protective revetments and placed them close together in the middle of the field for easier guarding. Ammunition from the aircraft was boxed and stored. On Dec. 7, the airplanes were parked wingtip to wingtip, easy targets for the Japanese, who also scored a direct hit on the hangar where the ammunition was kept.

Radar had been key to the defeat of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain the previous year, but that apparently made little impression on the Hawaii commanders. The Army had six mobile radars at Opana Point on the north shore of Oahu, but on Short's orders, they were active only from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m.

On Dec. 7, the radar operator wanted to get in some extra practice and thus, at 7:02 a.m., picked up the first wave of Japanese bombers 136 miles to the north. The information center at Fort Shafter was minimally manned and ignored the radar operator's report, figuring that it was a mistake.

It did not make that much difference, since the pursuit wing at Wheeler Field had been given the weekend off. Naval personnel were likewise on routine liberty ashore after a week of hard training and the anti-aircraft guns on ships in the harbor were not on effective alert.

THE TENTH REVIEW

A considerable number of senior officers believe that Kimmel and Short did all they could under the circumstances and have been unfairly singled out for blame. Among their supporters have been World War II Adm. William F. Halsey, former Chief of Naval Operations Adm. James L. Holloway, and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Thomas H. Moorer.

In 1995, Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services committee—acting at the request of the Kimmel family in his state—demanded that the Department of Defense reopen the case. The inquiry, the 10th since 1941, was led by Edward L. Dorn, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

The Dorn report in December 1995 was not what Thurmond wanted. Although it recognized that responsibility for the disaster should not fall solely on Kimmel and Short, it said that they could not be absolved of accountability.

"The intelligence available to Admiral Kimmel and General Short was sufficient to justify a higher level of vigilance than they chose to maintain," the report said. "Different choices might not have discovered the carrier armada and might not have prevented the attack, but different choices—a different allocation of resources—could have reduced the magnitude of the disaster."

The Dorn report concluded that Kimmel and Short had not been victims of unfair official actions and it did not recommend their promotion on the retired list. No change was made in their status.

In 1999, Senators William V. Roth Jr. (R-Del.) and Joseph Biden (D-Del.), responding to Kimmel supporters in their constituency, sponsored a nonbinding resolution to exonerate Kimmel and Short. It passed the Senate, 52-47, but the Department of Defense declined to act on it. In 2015, the Navy turned down yet another appeal on behalf of Kimmel and Short.

THE MEMORY EVOLVES

With the passage of time, the number of people with personal memory of Pearl Harbor and the reaction to it has dwindled. The sense of it is more distant and less intense.

Books and articles continue to appear. The traditional interpretation prevails but conspiracy theorists have found a new forum ideal for their purposes on the Internet.

A poll of college students at the University of New Hampshire in 2014 found limited interest and knowledge about Pearl Harbor among millennials. To them, the 9/11 attacks were of far greater significance.

In 1994, Congress declared Dec. 7 to be National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day. The custom is to fly the flag at half-staff, but it is not an official holiday. Government offices, schools, and businesses do not close.

The National Park Service visitor center at Pearl Harbor draws 1.5 million visitors a year. Observance of the anniversary at the historic site each December still centers on the attack and the loss of American lives, but the tone of the remembrance has evolved.

The theme for the upcoming 75th anniversary commemoration at Pearl Harbor will be the same as last year, "Pathway to Reconciliation: From Engagement to Peace," which the Park Service explains is "focused on the rebuilding and solidification of the friendship between the United States and Japan." ✪

Who Knew What?

		Washington	Kimmel	Short
Oct. 9	"Bomb Plot" message	♦		
Nov. 26-28	"Winds" message	♦	♦	
Nov. 27	"War Warning" messages	♦	♦	♦
Dec. 1	Carrier call sign change	♦	♦	
Dec. 2	"Lost carriers"	♦	♦	
Dec. 3-6	Code destruction	♦	♦	♦
Dec. 6-7	14-part message	♦		

Dates for Japanese messages are when the decoded information was available to US officials.

John T. Correll was editor in chief of *Air Force Magazine* for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "Air and Space and Aerospace," appeared in the October issue.